

To plant or not to plant—Irish farmers' goals and values with regard to afforestation

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ABSTRACT

To encourage Irish farmers to transfer land into forestry, a premium scheme supporting farmers who afforest was implemented in 1989 and afforestation targets outlined in 1996. In the period from 1996 to 2006, however, only half of the targeted area was planted in Ireland. As the income of many farmers would improve when joining the scheme, a number of studies have been conducted to find out why the response was not as expected. However, to date the phenomenon has not been explained. Amongst the studies undertaken, a lack of qualitative approaches looking at farmers' decision-making was identified. In order to understand farmers' decisions regarding farm afforestation, in-depth interviews with 62 farmers in the North-West and Mid-Western regions of Ireland were conducted in winter and spring 2011. The interviews were based on the theory of farmers' goals and values developed by Ruth Gasson in 1973 and relate specifically to their instrumental, intrinsic, social and expressive values about farming. The results of this study show that farmers exhibit complex, multiple and sometimes contradictory values in relation to farming. The biggest group in the study were guided by intrinsic values when it comes to farm afforestation. Their decision not to plant is made based on their values and beliefs about farming, e.g. that it is a shame to plant land used for food production, even if this returns a greater profit. A much smaller group were directed by profit maximisation when it comes to afforesting land. These farmers would plant if the financial incentives for forestry were more attractive, e.g. if the premiums available for afforestation were higher or if the outlook for agricultural profits was not as good as anticipated.

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Introduction

Farm forestry in Ireland

Ireland has one of the most favourable climates for tree growth in Europe, with a mean annual increment almost double the European average (Kearney and O'Connor, 1993; Ní Dhubháin and Kavanagh, 2003). Under natural conditions, the whole island would be covered with trees (Neeson, 1991). However, due to continued resource exploitation and the expansion of agriculturally used land, forest cover decreased throughout the centuries and reached an all-time low in the 1890s, with only 1% of the land under forest. Due to a number of afforestation programmes, forests currently cover approximately 11% of the total land surface—considerably less than the European average of about 40% (EUROSTAT, 2010).

Up until the 1980s, afforestation was primarily undertaken by the State. The first increase in private sector planting followed the introduction of the EEC-funded Western Package Scheme in

1980. Farmers afforesting part of their holding could obtain up to 85% of their establishment costs (Ní Dhubháin and Wall, 1999). In 1989, a countrywide afforestation scheme was introduced, which pays farmers an additional subsidy in the form of an annual premium to provide an income from the time of planting until the time the first timber harvest was due (Behan and McQuinn, 2005). The value of the premiums increased significantly (Fig. 1) after the scheme was transformed into an accompanying measure according to EC regulation 2080/92 (Frawley, 1998; Behan and McQuinn, 2005; Ní Dhubháin et al., 2009). As a consequence, private planting rates peaked in 1995 with 17,000 ha of farm land being afforested (Forest Service, 2009). Encouraged by these figures, the national forestry strategy 'Growing for the Future', published in 1996, set ambitious planting targets of 25,000 ha per annum until the year 2000, and 20,000 ha per annum from 2000 until 2030 (DAFF, 1996). This level of afforestation was predicted to lead to a level of timber output necessary to facilitate the establishment of a viable wood-processing sector, leading to additional employment opportunities (DAFF, 1996; Irish Government, 2002; DAFF, 2010). It was acknowledged that the 'afforestation of agricultural land would displace existing agricultural employment insofar as it displaces agricultural output' (DAFF, 1996, p. 3). However, it was considered that 'in contrast to agricultural employment, forestry would create reasonably well paid permanent full time jobs' (DAFF, 1996, p. 3).

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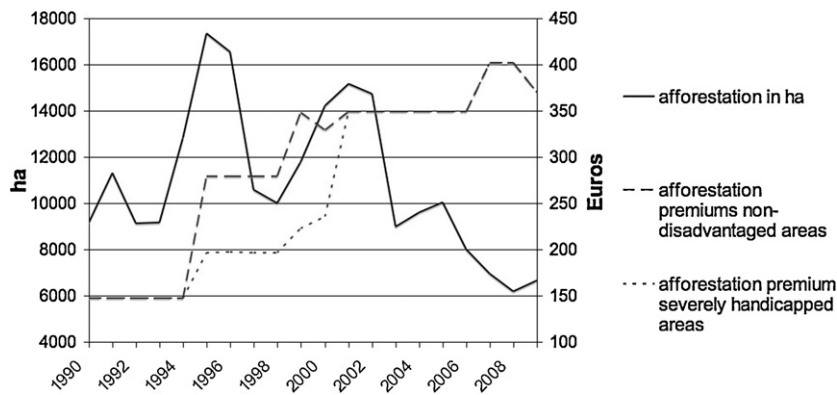


Fig. 1. Private afforestation rates (ha/year) and rate of annual farm afforestation premium (Euros/ha) in Ireland 1990–2010.

Source: Irish Farmers' Association (1991–1996); Irish Timber Growers Association (1997–2010); Forest Service (2010).

Nevertheless, interest in planting dropped significantly after the strategy was launched. In the period from 1996 to 2009, only 48% of the targeted area of farmland was planted with trees (Forest Service, 2009), even though the value of the premium was increased in 1995, 1999, and 2007 (Fig. 1). This decline in planting has been attributed in part to the availability of additional agri-environmental subsidies paid under the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), introduced in the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in 1993. These subsidies offered farmers a competitive alternative to forestry that did not require a change in land use (Bacon, 2003), i.e. REPS provided farmers with an additional subsidy to continue farming albeit in a more environmentally friendly fashion. The costs of complying with the scheme were minimal for those operating cattle and sheep farms, which traditionally had been the farming type most likely to be converted to forestry. A further attraction of REPS for farmers was that the land enrolled could be withdrawn after the period of five years, whereas the decision to afforest was irreversible under current legislation (McCarthy et al., 2003). The general decline in planting from 2002 was linked to the increasing value of land in Ireland; afforestation was considered to devalue the land asset as it was permanent change in land use (Malone, 2008). To make the afforestation scheme even more attractive, the Irish Government introduced the stacking of the Single Farm Payment in 2005, allowing a farmer who afforested land to continue to receive direct payments on that land.¹ Nevertheless planting rates did not meet the targets and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food states in its Rural Development Programme for the period from 2007 to 2013 that 'the major difficulty with the [afforestation] programme at the moment is the low rate of take-up' (DAFF, 2010).

Farm forestry and agricultural change in Ireland

According to the Irish forestry strategy, 70% of the planting target was to be carried out by private landowners—more specifically by farmers (DAFF, 1996). The rationale for the continued support of farm afforestation is closely linked to a paradigm shift in the EU agricultural policy from a 'productivist' to a 'post-productivist' agricultural regime. According to Lowe et al. (1993), productivism can be conceptualised as the commitment to an intensified, industrially driven agriculture driven primarily by increased output and productivity. In defining the post-productivist agricultural regime,

Ilbery and Bowler (1998) characterise it as a shift in agricultural policy from intensification to extensification, from concentration of agricultural resources to the dispersion of resources and from agricultural specialisation to diversification. While such categorisations are widely deployed in explaining the fundamental shift that has taken place in postwar agriculture, the dualistic nature of the productivist/post-productivist discourse has been criticised as potentially misleading, leading to a forced categorisation in which underlying processes of change often remain unspecified (Wilson, 2001; Evans et al., 2002). At a policy level, responses to the problems associated with 'industrialised agriculture' were apparent in the rural development measures introduced in some EU member states as early as in the 1960s (O'Connor and Dunne, 2009). From the early 1980s, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was continuously reformed. First implemented were quotas, set-aside and extensification regulations. Later on, with the Mac Sharry reforms in 1992, agri-environmental measures and the general support of the afforestation of agricultural land followed. As the focus of these policies is on support decoupled from agricultural output, the new rural development paradigm is often referred to in the 'contentious' post-productivist terms outlined above (van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Potter and Burney, 2002; O'Connor et al., 2006). Part of this post-productivist rural development paradigm today is the notion of multifunctionality, which became a defining feature of the European model of agriculture (Potter and Burney, 2002). Many definitions and interpretations of the term multifunctionality are discussed in the literature. The most commonly used concept is that of multifunctionality being the 'joint production of commodities and non-commodity outputs (public goods and externalities)' (O'Connor and Dunne, 2009, p. 334). It needs to be pointed out however, that the notion of multifunctionality is also not an uncontested one. For the advocates of further trade liberalisation within the WTO, multifunctionality is regarded as disguised protectionism (Dibden et al., 2009; O'Connor and Dunne, 2009).

Marsden and Sonnino (2008) classify an agricultural activity as being multifunctional if it adds income to agriculture, reconfigures rural resources in ways that lead to wider rural development and contributes to the needs of the wider society. Based on this definition, farm afforestation can be regarded as part of the concept of multifunctional agriculture, as farm forestry—according to European and Irish policies—is expected to meet precisely these targets. First, farm forests are expected to create an alternative source of income for farmers (DAFF, 2010). This can either be provided through non-food resources like timber or bark; or through food-resources such as game, honey, berries and mushrooms (Glueck, 1998). Second, it is assumed that forestry and related services or industries contribute to the development of rural economies (DAFF, 1996). This is because locally owned and managed farm forests

¹ Due to Ireland's critical economic situation, forestry premiums in 2009 were cut—surprisingly little—by 8%. In the government's budget 2012 target planting levels were adjusted to 7000 ha. However the overall strategy of increasing the forest cover to 17% until 2030 is still in place.

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